

JENNIFER BAIN PHOTOS / TORONTO STAR

Westview Centennial Secondary School turned over its garden last summer to three students whose families are Karen refugees from Burma. The families tended the garden and got to feed themselves from it. Apollo Moo, 16, is one of those students.

A garden runs through it

How does a garden grow? At Westview Centennial Secondary School, it grows when the dreams of adults and the green work of students align.

Westview's garden isn't much to look at, just rows of dirt being seeded. There's a greenhouse, too, full of staff plants ending their winter stay, and seedlings awaiting their move to the garden.

In this garden you'll find people like Apollo Moo. He is 16, a Karen refugee from a farming culture in Burma.

Three Karen families (19 people) tended to this garden last summer and fed themselves from the harvest.

Moo greets my questions with teenaged nonchalance.

What did they plant?

Zucchini, squash, potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants, long beans and chilies. Moo's face lights up at the memory of the chilies.

What did they do with the har-



JENNIFER BAIN

Saucy Lady

she is nurturing?

"Maybe the carrots. I feel love for it, but I just don't do it."

Fellow EcoSchools member Shaquel Miller, also 14, is more tolerant of the vegetable kingdom.

"It's pretty good for me, as long as I've got dressing on the side. Ranch — it's the best."

Westview, by the way, is in the Jane-Finch corridor. That's code for poverty, violence and hunger to most Torontonians, who only read about the "at-risk/priority" neighbourhood.

Principal Paul Edwards had that



Westview's EcoSchools club is helping with its garden. Shaquel Miller, left, and Naima Hassan, both 14, signed up to do green work.

green-minded teachers. He will relaunch a horticultural course in September.

"I know this sounds staged," says Edwards, "but it's real school-community relations in a major piece of life — creating food."

of organic produce this year for students, community events and food banks.

"The cheapest food is food you can grow yourself," says PACT's urban agriculture director Eric Payseur. "The healthiest food is

In a class of their own

Jul 8 2010

Seeking to improve the academic performance of boys, educators are increasingly looking to single-gender learning

BY JOHN LORINC

When Westview Centennial Secondary School introduced two “single-gender” life skills/leadership courses for 300 Grade 9 students last fall, many of the boys initially balked. “When they came in and saw no girls, they said, ‘Are you crazy?’” recalled social sciences teacher Peter Banhan, 39, who championed the pilot program.

By year-end, he said, the kids were so sold on spending part of an otherwise co-ed school day in an all-boy or all-girl class that they wanted to do it again. Westview’s incoming principal Patrick Knight said the results bolster that feedback: The students’ marks rose, attendance improved and suspensions fell.

Westview is thinking of expanding the program to math and science.

The concept of single-gender classes within co-ed schools was a hot topic at the Toronto District School Board’s first-ever “summer institute on boys learning” this week. About 400 teachers and administra-



Attendance improved, marks rose and suspensions fell when one Toronto school tried all-boy classes. PETER POWER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

WITHOUT LIMITATIONS



TARA WALTON/TORONTO STAR

Ward 7 Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti visits Westview Centennial Secondary School — his high school in the late 1970s — on Monday to talk with students in a Grade 10 civics class.

Guns? What about car control?

Mayoral hopeful Mammoliti talks tough on gangs, but Jane-Finch teens ask him for school crosswalk

JOHN SPEARS
CITY HALL BUREAU

Ayaan Awale and the students in her Grade 10 civics class at Westview Centennial Secondary School wanted to talk about a crosswalk.

Mayoral candidate Giorgio Mammoliti wanted to talk about guns and gangs.

In the end, both got what they wanted: The students got a promise from Mammoliti that he'll take their 1,000-name petition for a crosswalk to city hall. And he got a platform for his tough-on-crime message: That anyone who even holds an illegal gun should go to jail.

Reporters were invited to sit in on the class at Westview, the high school Mammoliti attended in the late 1970s, in the ward he now represents: Ward 7, York West.

He reminded the students that he has higher ambitions: "I'm a mayoralty candidate, so you are talking to the next mayor of the city of Toronto," he said. Mammoliti is running against former deputy premier George Smitherman and a raft of other potential candidates, including Deputy Mayor Joe Pantalone.

Awale said the students chose the crosswalk because it was an issue

where their voice could make a difference. "We believe it's safer for us to have a crosswalk, for us to cross from here to the plaza," Awale said, adding she knows of two students struck by cars there in the past year.

They had planned to carry their petition to city hall until Mammoliti agreed to meet them in class.

He said he'd present their petition but wouldn't commit to supporting a crosswalk. Instead, he said he'll ask for a review of the area that might include new traffic lights.

Awale and several others also wanted Mammoliti to know they feel their neighbourhood has been unfairly smeared.

"I grew up in Jane and Finch," she said. "I believe Jane and Finch is a safe and wonderful community be-

cause people interact with each other. If you do become the mayor, I hope that you can . . . try to change the way that people pretty much label Jane and Finch."

Mammoliti agreed, but said there are still things that can be improved. "Guns is an issue. Gang membership is an issue."

Flourishing a photo of basketball player Gilbert Arenas, he said he's writing a letter to the NBA urging that Arena be jailed for bringing guns into a locker room.

"Nobody should even hold (a gun) or have it on them without going to jail. No forgiveness. That's the tough approach I'd like to bring, and convince provincial and federal governments that we need to do."

Speaking to reporters afterward,

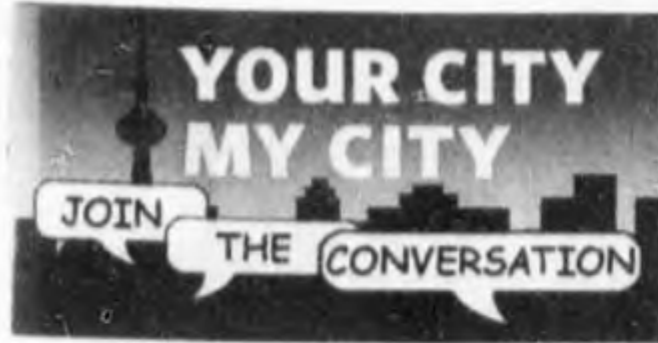
Mammoliti said the city needs a mayor who "gives a nod to city officials to say: Flex your muscles a little bit. You're not going to get any political ramifications." Some police "are afraid to even pull out their gun to protect themselves because of difficulties politically," he said. "We've got to rid of that."

Mammoliti said city hall has focused on downtown and neglected needy suburbs. He'd like to see a Jane subway line, and others, built by public-private partnerships.

How did he go over with students? "I think he was straight and direct, and I like that," said Awale. "If I was old enough, I'd vote for him."

Alas, she's only 15, so Mammoliti will have to wait until the 2014 election to get her vote.

Tackling respect through rugby



Probation officer starts high school girls' squad that succeeds despite lack of experience

JANESSA LU
STAFF REPORTER

The teenage girls come bounding into the classroom with trays of food, from homemade lasagna to fried rice, and of course, cupcakes and brownies.

School has just let out. They're excited and happy, talking at the same time, and letting out the occasional squeal and laugh when they see their images play on the television.

Meet the members of the first girls' rugby team for Westview Centennial Secondary School — who managed to finish fourth out of eight in their inaugural season, even though they were always short at least three players.

After three losses and three wins including a 41-0 blowout, they are now devotees of the sport, even though just a few months ago, they didn't know a thing about rugby.



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Laura McAndrew, second from right, enjoys a laugh with some of the Westview Centennial teammates as they watch some season highlights.

It was nice to see a group of girls bond the way they did

AMANDA CLARKE,
HEAD OF PHYS ED AT
WESTVIEW CENTENNIAL

high-needs neighbourhood where

and offered several introduction-to-rugby sessions.

Flyers went up to join the team, and Clarke had to cajole a few girls to sign up. They managed to come up with 13 — two short of the 15 required on the field for a game.

"We went into every game short-handed. But by the end, we were winning," Clarke said, even though injuries sidelined a few for a time. "It was nice to see a group of girls bond the way they did. Four or five

cause we're putting our bodies at risk," she said. "And you don't bad-mouth other girls."

Several openly admit they wanted to quit when they first signed up — but they stuck with it.

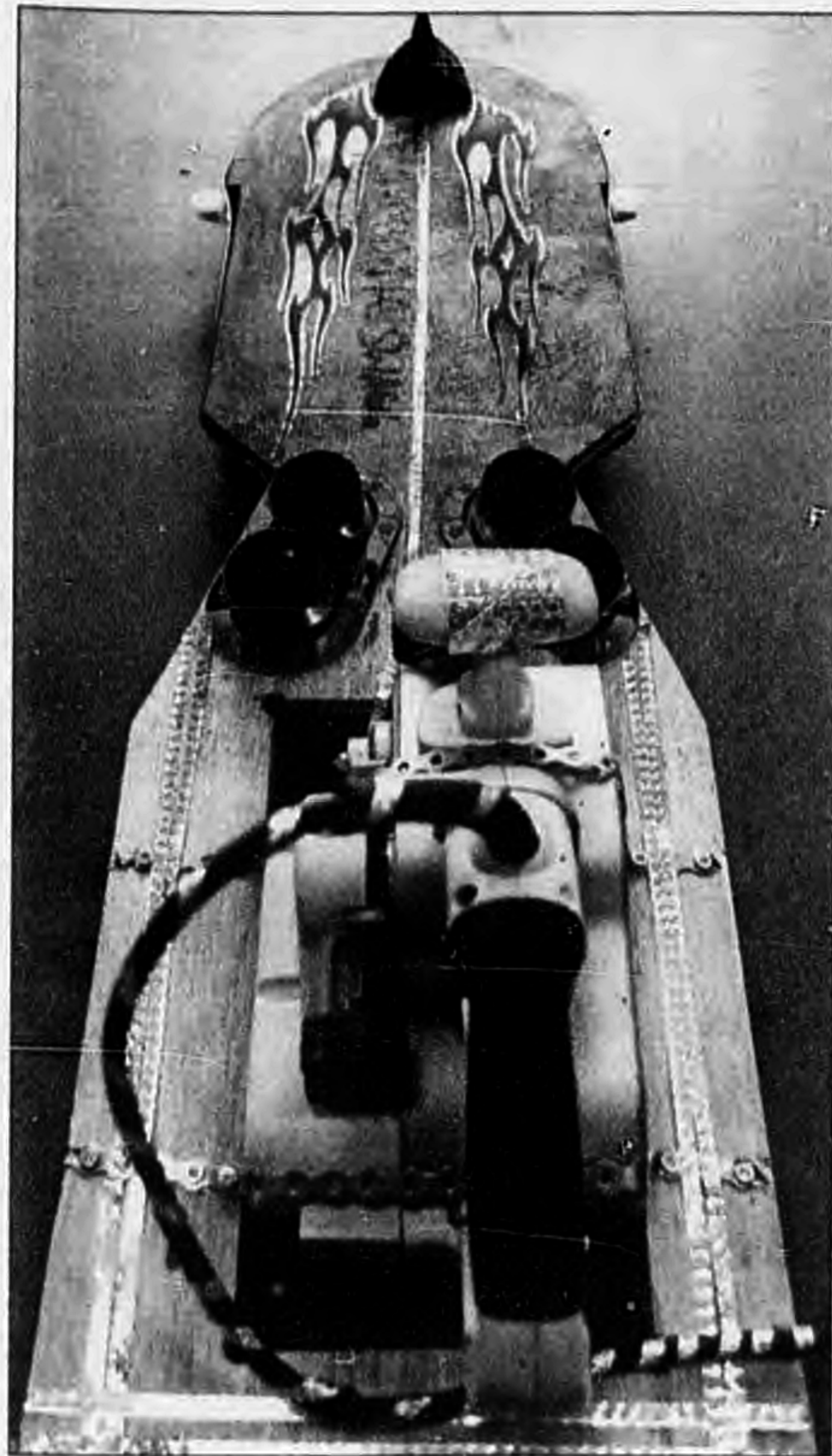
"Rugby is the only sport where a girl can be aggressive and still be a girl," McAndrew said. "It's about power and controlled aggression."

Betty-Anne Appiagyei, 16, agrees that she loved the "tackling people part." Rose Nguyen, 14, said she got

sponsibilities: schoolwork, part-time jobs and looking after younger brothers and sisters.

McAndrew ended up buying contact lenses for one girl whose family couldn't afford to buy them and who wouldn't have been able to play otherwise.

Unlike kids from more prosperous neighbourhoods, where parents might be able to drive players to games, these teens, age 14 to 18, travelled by TTC as much as 90



STEVE RUSSELL PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

Building a dragster introduces kids to the trades. Clarissa Amofa, left, watches as Brandon Vickerd helps Ahijah Warren and staff member Miriam Elmi at the Jane-Finch Boys and Girls Club.

Drag racers teach kids that trades can be fun

After-school program helps Grade 6 students from Jane-Finch community get a feel for power tools

LOUISE BROWN
EDUCATION REPORTER

Startled by the shriek of a pressure valve on the airbrush machine she was poised to use, Clarissa Amofa was gone — clear to the far side of the studio.

For six weeks, 14 young members of the Jane-Finch Boys and Girls Club had grown used to the sounds of power tools — the sanders, the drills, the hammers — but they weren't prepared for the explosion of noise from the paint machine brought in to the last class.

"It's just air coming out of the back. There's nothing to worry about," coaxed teacher Joey Fer-

nandez as the Grade 6 student cautiously returned to start painting the small wooden dragster — propelled by an electric belt sander — that she had helped build.

Welcome to *Pimp My Ride* meets *Tool Time* meets *Art Attack*, all rolled into one after-school program.

In a bid to help today's hi-tech kids get a feel for the skilled trades, York University's fine arts faculty invited students from the nearby Jane-Finch community for a crash course in building drag racers fuelled by power tools. The students worked in two teams and, by last week, were adding the finishing

touches on their competing masterpieces using the airbrush paint machines brought in by Fernandez and his brother Mike, who run a company that decorates motorcycles.

The students will race their tool-mobiles, tricked out with lightning bolts, fins and skulls, in a power-tool Grand Prix Tuesday at Yorkgate Mall on the northwest corner of Jane and Finch.

"It's an opportunity to straddle the trades and art and also break down the stigma people can attach to both," said Steven Laurie, the curator of York's art gallery who dreamed up the youth outreach program.

"Kids don't get introduced to the trades in elementary school any more, so I wanted to catch them

before high school to show them the diversity and creativity of jobs in the trades," said Laurie.

Before long, Clarissa had donned a dust mask and safety goggles and was dispensing orange paint from the airbrush nozzle along the edge of her team's dragster.

"I took the program because I wanted to learn how to use tools like the drill," said the shy 12-year-old from Brookview Middle School.

Kadiatu Barrie, the only other girl in the group, says she thought "it would be interesting to do something new. I used to think building things would be boring and hard. Now I know you get to build cool things." The 12-year-old already knows a Robertson from a Phillips screwdriver.

Brandon Vickerd, a sculpture pro-

fessor at York and one of a team of artists and trades people helping with the program, said he believes tool skills are a dying art.

"I have first-year sculpture students who don't know how to hold a hammer. They're just not being exposed to trades in school the way they were even 10 years ago," said Vickerd.

Bill Thornton, head of tech at nearby Westview Centennial Secondary School and part of the team running the program, says this kind of course teaches teamwork as well as building basics, but notes "parents often don't want their kids going into the trades. In the countries they came from, trades people are seen as servants, so they want them to go to university. But a lot drop out and go into construction."

JVS award honours teen

Hard work, love, determination helped young woman keep her family together

LESLIE FERENC
STAFF REPORTER

June is shaping up to be a stellar month for Rickeshia Brooks.

When she steps onto the stage at Westview Centennial Secondary School in a few weeks, the 19-year-old will be the first in her family to graduate from high school — with a B+ average no less.

And when her name is called along with other winners of this year's JVS Strictly Business Awards next Thursday, Brooks will hold her head even higher. After all, she'd grown up hearing that she'd never amount to anything. They're not family any more.

"Sometimes I would wonder if they were right," said the young woman with the broad smile. "But I remained above their influence. I didn't accept the seeds they were trying to sow. I didn't want what they were planning for my future.

"And to them I say, 'You were wrong.'"

Her achievements were born out of great hardship and instability.

Before her teens, Brooks was uprooted from life in Toronto as her family moved into one of New York City's most dangerous and crime-ridden areas. Surrounded by what was happening outside her window and an equally tumultuous environment at home "gave me a reality check early in life.

"I didn't get involved with all that because I was too busy looking after my family and keeping up my grades at school," said Brooks. By her early teens she became mother and father to her younger brother and sisters as her parents battled their own demons. "I did it because I had to. I wanted to be a knight in shining armour for my family."

A few years later, they all moved to



TORONTO STAR/LESLIE FERENC

Rickeshia Brooks, left, 19, is among the winners of this year's JVS Strictly Business Awards. Brooks says she couldn't have done it without JVS YouthReach counsellor Zola Jeffers, who nominated her for the award.

Arizona where life became even more difficult and intolerable for the teen. "At 15, I didn't see the light anymore," Brooks said, adding she quit school to provide for her siblings and protect her mother from an abusive relationship. "I had no hope."

Her only haven was in the comfort and security of her beloved grandmother's home in Toronto where she lived from time to time. When her grandmother got cancer, Brooks returned to Toronto to nurse her, leaving school again to remain at her side until her death.

But she never forgot her dream of one day graduating, even going on to university. Her deep love for her mother, brother and younger siblings gave her the strength to forge ahead.

Brooks's destiny was changed by a referral to the JVS YouthReach

program, operating out of a mall at Jane and Finch.

The agency was established in 1947 by members of the Jewish community to meet the vocational needs of World War II survivors. Today, it offers more than 40 programs and has helped more than 500,000 people achieve success at work, school and life.

YouthReach counsellor Zola Jeffers helped Brooks when she walked into the office last June. It was a life-changing step.

"Zola is a mentor and someone I look up to," Brooks said. "I've always been searching for stability in my life and here she is. Zola cares about me, is very protective of me and loves me like family."

The two worked as a team, preparing resumés and getting ready for job interviews, even going to local malls as Brooks searched for work.

She landed a job, all the while attending classes to finish her high school diploma.

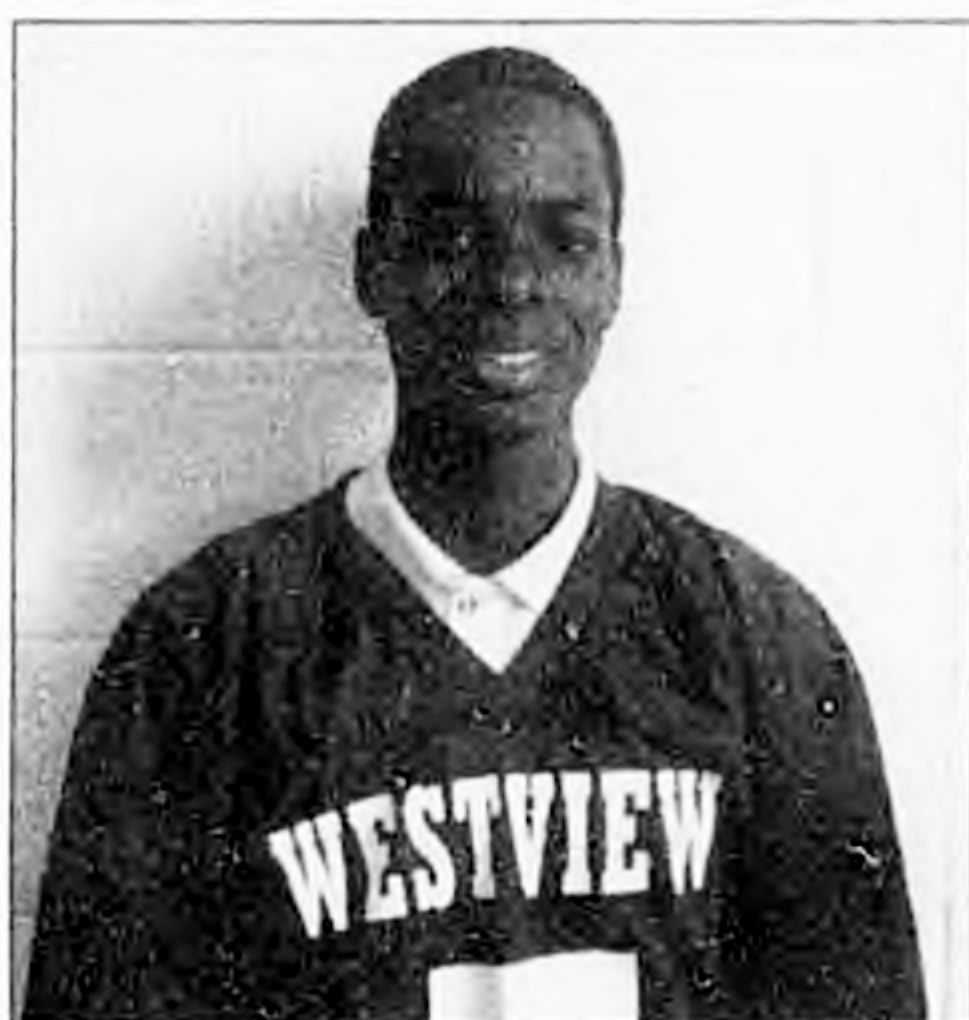
The closer they worked together the more Brooks revealed about herself. Jeffers was awestruck and so nominated the young woman for the Strictly Business Youth Award.

"I feel humbled and honoured that I was a vessel to tell her story," Jeffers said. "She's a rock and an inspiration to us all."

Other award winners this year include:

- Eugene Alekseev, Newcomer Award
- Adrian Clarke, Youth Award
- Faye Oxley, Spirit Award
- Professional Warehouse Demonstrations, Inspirational Award.
- Super Seal Manufacturing Ltd., Employer Award
- Options Building Services, Employer Mentoring Award

HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES OF THE WEEK



SHAWN SHEPPARD

SCHOOL: Westview Centennial
LEAGUE/CITY: TDSSAA/Toronto
GRADE: 12 **AGE:** 17

- QB rushed for four TDs, scored on a reception and passed for another in a 58-0 league win over Jefferys.
- Won a gold medal in the 400 metres last May clocked in 52.5 seconds at the TDSB North Region track and field finals.
- Mentor in the school leadership program.
- Has a 62 per cent academic average.
- Member of the school athletic council.
- Played for the Etobicoke Eagles last summer in the Ontario Varsity Football League.
- Former junior athlete of the year at his school.



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